

ABRAHAM  
AND HIS TIMES.

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# ABRAHAM

AND HIS TIMES.

## Two Sermons

Preached in the First Congregational Church of  
Fall River, Mass., Feb. 17th and 24th, 1901

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BY WM. W. ADAMS, PASTOR.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

The sermons are the latest two, of a series still unfinished. Authority for statements respecting the city of Nippur is found in articles, written for the Sunday School Times, by Prof. H. V. Hilprecht, scientific director of the expedition. Other information is derived from the latest and most trustworthy sources.

## SERMON.

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Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan. Gen. 11:31.

That journey represented the beginning of a new period of human history: the beginning of a course of events still continuing, than which there has never been anything more important in history. It was a small beginning certainly, and for the most part a very obscure one; but in that respect it corresponded with all most important beginnings, especially in Divine processes. The beginnings of life, even the immortal life of beings in the image of God, are from microscopic germs; and the first processes are imperceptible. The beginnings of great empires have commonly been insignificant; the mightiest and most important movements of history have often had their rise in events which in themselves seemed very trivial, and became momentous only because of their relations and their outcome.

As regards the journey of Terah and Abram, and events connected with it, certain famous Christian scholars and literary critics, of the last half of the nineteenth century, made many sweeping and most confident statements, which contradict the common beliefs of previous centuries. The statements are still repeated, though in later years more often considerably modified, by the successors of

those scholars; who also sometimes claim a practical monopoly of knowledge respecting the matters treated. One statement, fundamental to all others, has been that in the times in which Abram was alleged to live, the world had no literature and no written languages properly so called. Ancient monuments there were, the precise age of which no one knew; and here and there a limited amount of hieroglyphic inscription, the meaning of which was at least obscure, the characters of which in any case could not have been extensively used, while of such language the alleged Abram of Mesopotamia could have had no knowledge, still less could have made any use.

The first and necessary inference from that premiss was that whatever purported to be a history of times long preceding the early days of Greece and Rome, could have no better authority than oral tradition or folk-lore, repeated from generation to generation and from age to age, with many additions and changes in transmission, made from conjecture, from fancy, from ancestral and national vanity. The word myth came into use, to express the quality of some such alleged history. In current and unlearned utterance it was practically a new word, and for a time many did not clearly understand the meaning of it. Certainly there had been unrecorded traditions in all ages, and many of the religious stories of Greeks and Romans were known to be myths, some of them possibly taking their origin from facts of nature or from philosophic conjecture. It was known, too, that many stories of mediæval times, concerning alleged events in the history of Christianity, had

no better foundation than ignorance respecting processes of nature, with superstition, imagination, credulity. The times of early Scripture history were times of still greater ignorance, superstition, credulity, it was said; and the conditions of those times the world only very slowly outgrew. Some of the traditions and myths then current had great vitality because they were religious, and were plausibly presented as a history of events out of which Judaism grew, and Christianity which is based on Judaism.

But the temper of the nineteenth century was by eminence scientific; in respect to history as well as in respect to nature. All previous beliefs must be subjected to scientific criticism. Early traditions of what sort soever, which had passed from mouth to mouth for ages, obviously could have no authority; and presumably many of them were mythical. The alleged early history of the Jewish Scriptures could not possibly be history in the modern sense of the word. A little of it may have had some foundation in fact, as ancient folk-lore; but of course most of it must be fable, myth or story deliberately invented for a purpose. That phrase "must be" was very frequently used in an oracular manner, even in stating a merely individual theory or assumption; and it is still characteristic of those who remain under the influence of the prepossessions already stated. The apparent close connection between the fictitious events of the early time and the historic events of subsequent times suggests that at least some of the stories had been invented to give plausible foundation for subsequent events, the primary causes and conditions of which are

unknown. Thus one famous scholar, but recently deceased, held to the day of his death that the story of Jacob and the twelve patriarchs was a pure invention to give a reputable origin to the people of Israel; while of course they "must" have had their origin in the accidental drifting together of feeble Bedouin tribes which, because they were feeble, formed a union for mutual defence and support.

Such, in general, was the state of mind prevalent among a number of scholars, who prided themselves upon their learning, some of whom were certainly men of great ability, and who have not a few followers among the Christian scholars of today. In that state of mind, on the assumption that early Scripture history must be without authority, partly because, at the best, it must have been made up of traditions passing from mouth to mouth during long ages when there was no literature and no written language—in that state of mind the scholars referred to began to subject the Scripture records to a literary and historical criticism which was thoroughly sceptical and suspicious to begin with. Some of the canons of criticism most frequently applied have been, to say the least, of very questionable validity. Such, for instance, as these; 'The narrator who does not mention some well-known event of the times of which he is writing "must have been" ignorant of that event, and therefore could not have lived in those times: as if any narrator of contemporaneous events ever mentioned all even of the fairly important events known by him. Certain important laws "could not have been" in existence at a given time because the practice of the time was at variance with



them: as if no important laws of our time were not habitually disobeyed and disregarded. The outline of historic events which is manifestly given for the sake of calling attention to the moral lesson of the events, cannot be received as truthful history, because the writer had a moral purpose in view: as if such a writer might not be most of all conscientious in historic statement, because the moral lesson is precisely in the events themselves: as if, also, many a most truthful historian of today did not have regard to the moral lesson of events narrated. Contradictions are continually manufactured by modes of interpretation. Mere diversities of statement are treated as contradictions: as if two different things might not both be true, as if any historic narrative must be considered all-comprehensive. Other diversities are declared incompatible when a harmonizing interpretation might be given which would be entirely natural and rational. Because the alleged history had for its materials only traditions coming from by-gone ages, it was a foregone conclusion that the narrative could not be true history. Therefore the work of criticism was merely to find evidence to sustain the foregone conclusion.

The critics found, or thought they found, literary evidence that the historic records of the Old Testament were not composed at the dates hitherto assigned, the dates claimed in some of the records themselves; but were composed centuries after those times, when the world had written languages and literatures. They found, or thought they found, that the records as we have them, each appearing to be the composition of some single author, were really not so composed. From two to four or more

independent narratives of different dates, by different authors who lived in different regions, had been most curiously and intricately pieced together, by combining long or short sections, by interweaving paragraphs, verses and parts of verses, by the culling and due insertion of single words; all the minutest details of source and combination being now for the first time discovered by the omniscient and infallible critics of the nineteenth Christian century. Yet even as thus put together, the record as we now have it might nevertheless be truthful, and perhaps one might even suppose it to be inspired. But the critics go on to say that the record thus prepared was edited and re-edited many times; each editor making such changes as he saw fit, the better to accomplish the particular purpose he himself had in view. The lynx-eyed critic is often ready to specify the word which editor number one inserted, the other word interpolated by number two, and so on. While of course it is to be remembered that even the original and component narratives were all from a late time, and without exception were made up of floating traditions and myths, some of which may have had a certain amount of fact underlying them, which we are to separate from the fable as best we may. Some narratives, however, especially those which claim to present the words of men of the early time, must be deliberate fictions or frauds. Thus one writer, in a Bible Dictionary now in course of publication, expressly affirms of the larger part of the book of Deuteronomy that "the majority of critics believe this book of the law to have been the result of a pious fraud promulgated by Hilkiah and Shaphan\* with the intention of

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\* In the seventh century B. C.

deceiving Josiah into the belief that the reforms which they desired were the express command of God revealed to Moses." Yet the book of Deuteronomy, more than any other book of the Old Testament, is pervaded by an earnest and pleading religious enthusiasm. It manifests the loftiest moral temper, it presents most urgently the highest moral standards, and it claims that some of its contents are the direct revelations and injunctions of Jehovah. No ordinary sinner could thus deliberately lie in the name of God for the sake of carrying through a genuine moral reform. No other man, deliberately perpetrating a fraud, has been able to give to his composition such tone of high spirituality, such uplifting fervor of religious earnestness in presenting the purest ideals.

It is not to be denied that the searching examination of scholarship and ability, using methods never so fully used before, has corrected errors of the old time, and has put many things in a new light. But the general outcome of this (in some of its representatives) most pretentious work of "scientific" criticism may be stated as follows: The foundation of Judaism was laid in falsities; the religious training of Judaism was in part by frauds and lies; yet the moral code of Judaism was the highest known in the ancient world and its religion was the truest, purest and most spiritual. Both morals and religion were produced by these falsities and frauds; Christ was the consummate flower of Judaism and Christianity is developed from it. Such causes do not produce such results. Christ himself said Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt, for

the tree is known by its fruit. Of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.

Historically, the scholars who, in any considerable number, first discredited the statements of the Old Testament were the so-called Rationalists of the first half of the nineteenth century. With them it was a fundamental principle to reject whatever could properly be called supernatural in Scripture story, including all miracles. In the rapid progress of knowledge much of traditional belief had been discarded or modified. Physical science was demonstrating the reign of law; it was believed that geologic changes had come to pass gradually under the uniform action of slowly working forces; and evolution was supposed to take place by imperceptible modifications requiring long periods of time and produced through the action of material forces only. Mediæval miracles, and miracles in non-Christian religions, were commonly discredited by Protestants. Why should the supernatural be recognized in Judaism and Christianity more than in other faiths of the world? One answer may be that so long as Jesus Christ can not be considered a mere product of his times, so long as it can be shown that he is author of an ever progressing and world-wide redemption, so long it will not be possible to exclude from Christianity or from Judaism that special and peculiar Divine agency which is indicated by the words supernatural and miraculous.

As years passed on there came many changes in scientific opinions, and in the statements of them. Geology admitted cataclysms, leaps were found in evolutionary processes, the acknowledged immanence

of God in nature led to the recognition of a constant Divine agency in the world and in history. The more recent scholars who have discredited Old Testament history commonly accept the supernatural in Christianity and, to a less degree, in Judaism. Their first premiss has been the existence of traditions merely in the olden times, and of conditions of mind and life which were incompatible with the clear discernment of fact and the careful transmission of knowledge. Therefore it is needful to consider the correctness of that premiss. Certainly if we are to have any clear understanding of that marvellous movement in history which is alleged to have begun with one called Abram, it is indispensably needful to know as much as possible of the times in which he is said to have lived, that we may judge of the reasons for such a movement at that time, and of the possibility of beginning it. Every decade during the last half of the nineteenth century furnished us with increasing knowledge of those times, the certainty and accuracy of which can not be questioned. The Scriptures give very little information. They tell the story of Abram, but for the ages preceding his time they give us only a chapter of genealogies. It is just as if knowledge of those ages was commonly possessed when the story of Abram was written; and as if later ages could obtain the knowledge if they sought for it. Modern times have been without that knowledge, and partly on that account the historic truthfulness of the Scripture story has been discredited. Because men did not know of any records in those ages, or of any culture that would care for records, they carelessly assumed that neither existed. Then they made their ignor-

ance the basis of an argument against the truthfulness of the Scriptures. But it will not do to argue from ignorance. That is not scientific; is not in accordance with common sense. That I am ignorant of a record does not prove that it does not exist, unless, indeed, I happen to be omniscient.

The ignorance of modern times respecting the early world—aside from Scripture story—began to be dissipated with the investigations respecting the pyramid-building Egyptians. Those investigations, however, threw little light upon the earlier portion of Scripture story. The first resultful investigations in Mesopotamia began in December 1842. The French government sent Paul Emil Botta to Mosul as vice consul. His curiosity had already been excited in regard to the remarkable mounds in that vicinity. He unearthed a marvellous palace with inscriptions and bas reliefs; but ere long he was transferred to government service elsewhere. In 1846 the Englishman Layard began to excavate in the same region. He discovered Nineveh, the mighty city of Scripture story; and proved that the ruins were the ruins of Nineveh. The Scripture story had been often discredited. Some town called Nineveh there might have been in ancient times but by no means such as the Scriptures represented—so great, so wonderful. The Scripture statements were confirmed, however, by the actual ruins. Records were found, and deciphered, of the very kings and campaigns described in the Old Testament.

From that time to the present, investigation has been almost continuous—increasingly interesting, increasingly marvellous in result, increasingly confirmatory of Scripture, and giving full information

of times long before Abram. The finest results, thus far, have been reached by Americans. In 1884 the American Oriental Society organized an expedition and sent Dr. W. H. Ward, managing editor of the *Independent*, on a rapid exploring tour through Babylonia. The ultimate result was the organization of a company for excavation, under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania. They began work in 1889, and, with some inevitable pauses, still continue it on the same site where they began. They have been digging up the capital city of Nippur, a great city long before Rome or Greece was heard of, before Nineveh or Babylon existed, before the pyramids were built in Egypt. The ruins were in a group of mounds eighty miles south east from Bagdad, three hundred miles down the Tigris from Nineveh, between the Tigris and Euphrates, but connected with both by large canals. One of these was the river Chebar, of Ezekiel: the old name has been found in texts taken from the ruins. While the Nippur of cuneiform records was probably the Calneh of Scripture story.

The principal mound was some seventy feet in height above the surrounding plain. Sections of it have been excavated some distance below the level of the plain of today, which is higher than in the old time. Evidence has been found of the continued existence of that city, in greater or less preservation, from probably about 7000 B. C. to 900 A. D. Sixty thousand inscribed tablets have been recovered: it is certain that many more are still under the soil. None yet obtained have an earlier date than 5000 B. C.; but from that time they are of all dates throughout the history of the city. They deal with

all subjects. Some are historic, some we should call scientific, many are religious. There are state documents and many business records, deeds of real estate, shopkeepers' accounts and such like. They are all in what is called linear writing; all in the same general character; but on the oldest tablets the characters are cruder in form, and evidently modified from hieroglyphics, some of which can be clearly made out. That linear writing, based upon preceding hieroglyphics, points to a previous period of considerable duration during which civilization was developing.

One of the gates of Nippur was excavated. According to evidence given, the foundation was laid 5000 B. C., made of bricks laid in bitumen, and so well built that it had never needed repair, though the upper courses were much worn by traffic. There were three entrances; a broad, central one for chariots, camels and other beasts of burden, and two side entrances at a higher level for pedestrians. A palace wall was unearthed, dating from 4000 B. C. The palace was six hundred feet long, two stories in height, with small windows near the ceiling. The pavement was of brick; within the precincts were ancient tablets, a well with a large inscribed vase near it, and leading from the well a drain. Of about the same date were marble statues, stone vases, bas reliefs of terra cotta, arrow heads and spear heads of copper and mace heads of stone. On the whole the most remarkable find, however, was a temple, in another mound of the same group some little distance away. It was dedicated to the god Bel and contained a library. The books are clay tablets in the cuneiform character, and they were



arranged in long rows on shelves running through a series of rooms. Only one twentieth part of the library portion of the temple has been excavated as yet, but twenty six thousand tablets have been taken out. It is estimated that from one hundred thousand to one hundred and fifty thousand more still lie under the ground. It is known that the temple was destroyed by a foreign enemy about 2300 B. C., a little before the time of Abram. It is witness, therefore, to the literary culture of Abram's time; as the city of Nippur, with which it was connected, is witness to the condition of civilization during a period from at least four thousand years before Abram down to hundreds of years after Christ.

Terah and Abram went forth from Ur of the Chaldees. It has been doubted if such a place as the Ur of Scripture story ever existed. Until recently no modern people knew the site of it, outside of the Scriptures no mention was made of it. It was a fabulous town, therefore, invented to give his first local habitation to the Abram of Jewish mythology. But Ur has been dug up. Its Scripture name has been found upon thousands of inscribed bricks; its name among the Arabs is El Mugheir, the place of bitumen; for it has been the place from which the Arabs have obtained bitumen for generations. As its records show, it was once a seaport on the Persian Gulf, but is now a hundred and fifty miles from the sea. The great rivers Tigris and Euphrates have long been filling up the northern end of the gulf, and we know the present rate of deposit. If the rate has been the same in ages gone, it must have been 6000 or 7000 B. C. when Ur was on the shore of the gulf. According

to its records it was an ancient city, for a time the capital city of a great empire. According to the inscription of one of the kings, whose date was before 4000 B. C., he ruled from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. The inscription of another king, a little later in time, may be read on a stone door-socket now in the city of Philadelphia. Another still, about 3800 B. C., made a military expedition to the coast of Syria, crossed over to Cyprus, and left in Cyprus an inscription which may now be seen in the Metropolitan Museum of New York. As its remains testify, Ur was a centre of manufactures and also of commerce, trading with India. Wealthy residents owned farms in the surrounding country, and employed attorneys to look after their tenants: we have record of their legal transactions. One person had a costly emerald set in a ring, and took a guarantee from the jeweler that the stone would not fall out in twenty years: we have the original guarantee to-day. Ur, also, had a famous temple, dedicated to the moon-god whose name was Sin. It is believed that there is a connection between the names Sin and Sinai: the Scriptures seem to indicate that Sinai was a sacred mountain before Moses led his flock to the foot of it.

Not long before Abram's time the Elamites of the eastern (Persian) mountains made successful insurrection against the empire of lower Mesopotamia. The leader was Hammurabi, who captured Ur, sacked and destroyed the temple of Nippur, and for the first time made Babylon a capital city. In the British Museum may be seen a hundred and fifty of his letters. Some of them are political, relating to the government of Babylonia; others

give direction respecting the felling of trees for smelting purposes, respecting the clearing of an old canal, respecting the claim of a subject to certain lands, which claim the king thought justified by ancient deeds; and such like. In a contract of Hammurabi's time we find the name Abram, the very name of Scripture story, borne by a different person. We have also the name Jacob-el.

Much contempt has been expressed for the alleged historic character of the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, and the military expedition of Chedorlaomer narrated in it. No such expedition could possibly have been made in that day, it has been said; and the claim of Chedorlaomer to sovereignty in Palestine is still more absurd. But we have already seen that long before the time of Abram Mesopotamian kings ruled Syria and made frequent expeditions. The expedition of Chedorlaomer was to suppress an insurrection against a new dynasty. In the records of Hammurabi we have all the names which are mentioned in Genesis. He was himself the Amraphel king of Shinar, or, as the Hebrew should be pronounced, Shingar, the very Sungir of the tablets in Babylonia. Chedorlaomer king of Elam was Kudur Lagamar, a genuine Elamitish name. Arioch king of Ellasar we read of on the tablets as Eri Aku king of Larsa, and Tidal king of Goiim is called king of Gutium on the tablets. The latest critical objection to this chapter of Genesis is that the story is an invention of the time of the exile, in the sixth century before Christ; and that the names were derived from Babylonian records during the exile. That merely shows the violent resorts which men will make when consciously driven into a corner.

Hammurabi oppressed the people whom he conquered, especially in the old seats of empire. Many of the people were Shemites, the very race to which Abram belonged: Hammurabi was of a different race. Therefore not a few of the Shemites of the conquered capitals migrated to other regions of the empire; to northern Mesopotamia, some of them to Syria. It was at the very time of that migration that Terah and Abram started on their journey, stopping for a season in northern Mesopotamia. The time was favorable for them personally, and favorable for the beginning of a new movement in history.

Thus in various ways the Mesopotamian tablets confirm the statements of Scripture as statements of historic fact. The general course of events, in the lifetime of Abram and before his time, the historic conditions, the troubles of the empire, the names, the original seats of the Shemites, are all in harmony with the narrative in Genesis. That narrative could not be so precise and exact if it had been merely an oral tradition repeated for ages by ignorant men. The times were enlightened, writing was customary among the common people. If Abram had any such high and important mission as he is alleged to have had, reaching to future ages in its results, he could not fail to make record of it and of the course of his life in fulfilling it.

Terah was a polytheistic idolater, one of the prophets tells us. He may have gone northward chiefly for political reasons, and in Haran he tarried and died. But from the time when we first know him, Abram was free from idolatry and was monotheist. It was a true contention of the late Prof. Max

Müller of Oxford that, historically, the world owes monotheism to Abram. The Jews had a tradition, recorded in the Talmud, that religious persecution was one prominent reason for his migration from Mesopotamia. Whatever other reasons there may have been, and other subordinate and concurrent reasons are quite probable, according to Scripture story the chief reason why he went to Palestine and thereafter led the peculiar life attributed to him, was a special mission respecting the future as founder of a new order of things.

We are not accustomed so to think of it, but our twentieth century civilization began with Abram. It is founded in monotheism and the principles that go with monotheism. The monotheism of Abram was germ of Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedanism. Mohammedanism is a perverted offshoot; Judaism and Christianity are related as the earlier and the later stages of the same great movement. It was a movement looking towards, and including, special and positive provisions for human redemption. There never had been such a movement before. There had been comprehensive but vague promise of redemption. There had been historic crises of judgment and warning by which the progress of evil in the world was arrested and hindered; but positive measures of redemption began with Abram. From his day to ours those measures have been carried out more and more fully, and in all human history there never has been any other systematic, efficient and non-working measures of redemption than those beginning with Abram. We are living in the midst of movements which started from him.

Because movement of redemption it was move-

ment of a far-reaching development of humanity towards its true goal. "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." The peculiar kind of development intended was slow for a long time, for it had great difficulties to overcome, and meanwhile the old processes of history went on as before. The forces of humanity are self-active, a certain degree of development is spontaneous; but in degenerate life its energy is not continuous. Civilization develops for a time, perhaps with rich results; then is blighted, and the bearers of it become prey of corruption. Another race appropriates as many of the products of previous civilization as it can, and then makes its own developments, with an ultimate result of recurring blight and corruption. Such was the process for ages after Abram. In general, corruption came sooner with each new development; the moral power of the race was failing, there was increasing need of redemption. During all this period peculiar moral and religious training was given in Judaism; preparations for comprehensive redemption were going on. A moral and religious foundation was laid for a development which should be continuous. Then the Christ came; the preparations were put to use. The old movement went on into processes more vigorous, more numerous, more comprehensive; into results ever greater, more various, more precious. We are living in the midst of them. The movements of history are increasingly rapid, the achievements are continually grander, the outlook is wonderful. Demonstrably all this began with Abram; in its peculiarity our civilization had its origin in him, or rather in God's calling and use of him. Other aspects of his times will be considered hereafter.

## II.

The Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing; and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. — *Gen. 12: 1-3*.

The time was about 2000 B. C. — perhaps a century or two earlier or later. The scripture data for chronology are imperfect, and the data given by Babylonian records have not been sufficiently examined to warrant a confident conclusion. It was, however, a time of highly developed civilization in the Mesopotamian valley. There were a number of cities which had been in existence for four thousand years or more, and which were filled with comfortable residences, chiefly of brick, with magnificent palaces and grand temples. A portion at least of the city population was wealthy, carrying on manufactures and commerce in the cities, owning farms and having tenants upon them in the surrounding country. In the palaces and temples, and presumably in some of the residences, were works of art—mural paintings, beautifully decorated vases, and graceful statuary, which command the admiration of men of to-day; and which, in the technical skill displayed, greatly surpassed the art of some centuries later. Outside of the cities lower Mesopotamia was

the garden of the world. It was the native home of wheat and barley, which commonly yielded two hundred fold, and of which two crops were harvested every year. It was also the native home of the date palm, groves of which were numerous. Other fruit trees were the apple, fig and apricot, with nut trees and vines, while the acacia furnished lumber. Many of the vegetables used by us were common in Babylonia. Birds were numerous and of many kinds; among domesticated animals were the camel, the ox, the ass, goats and sheep.

The Tigris and Euphrates annually overflowed much of the land, leaving behind a fertilizing deposit brought from the far north. For the dry season irrigating canals were numerous, some of them large enough to be used for commercial purposes. Domestic and foreign commerce was extensive. Vessels went to India and elsewhere, boats were on the great rivers and the canals. Over long used and famous highways the inland commerce was carried on by caravans, which went to Persia and beyond on the east, to Asia Minor on the north, to the Mediterranean coast on the west; while there was certainly intercourse, we know not how much, with the empire in the valley of the Nile. The civil and social condition was well developed. Every man's home was declared by law to be a sanctuary: severe penalties were inflicted upon parents who repudiated their children, and upon children who were disloyal to their parents. Slavery existed, but in the mildest possible form. The slave was member of the family as really as the child: law forbade the taking of his life, great treasures and sometimes the management of great enterprises were entrusted to him. Business life



was of course complex, and business interests were carefully guarded by law. Detailed accounts were kept in permanent records, notes were given for loans, deeds were witnessed and sealed, oaths were administered in important transactions, courts of law were held in the temples under religious sanction. What fairly corresponded to our common school education of to-day was practically universal, at least in the cities. There was no small amount of what may be called untechnical science. Architecture, boat building, road making and commerce implied practical science. Astrology was diligently cultivated; in the discharge of their religious duties the priests mapped out the heavens and made a beginning in astronomy. They knew the pole star, the constellation of Orion, the Great Bear, the planets and many of the stars. In that clear atmosphere the phases of Venus, from its crescent form to the full orb, were recognized by the naked eye of the strong sighted. Mercury was the blue star; the color of its light, clearly apparent, had religious significance; and in similar way Mars was the red star. In divisions of time they had a twelve hour day and a twelve hour night; and the week of seven days, with the seventh day observed as a "day of rest for the heart" ages before the time of Abram. The month was a lunar month, but the year a solar year as with us. The great libraries containing many thousand tablets included royal and civil records, dictionaries, works on grammar, historical, medical and scientific treatises, religious records, cosmologies, liturgies, hymns and works on magic. In polytheistic and grossly mythological form, documents found in the libraries so precisely correspond to the stories in Genesis of

the creation, the fall in Eden, and the flood, that no student of the facts has ever doubted that the two sets of records had a common origin.

Omitting, for the present, matters of religion, such in brief was the civilization in lower Mesopotamia, so far as we are now acquainted with it, when Abram was a lad in Ur. The family of which he was a member was certainly in good social position, and pecuniarily in very comfortable circumstances. Apparently the boy had been born in Ur: we have no intimation that the family were new comers; the conditions implied indicate long residence. We may be very certain that the boy was well trained in the knowledge and affairs of his time; that as he grew to maturity he profited by the many advantages, privileges and opportunities of his position. His after life proves him to have been a man of exceptional ability in administration, a man of discernment and insight, with mental grasp and far ranging thought; self poised, independent and resolute; peculiarly high minded and magnanimous, peculiarly spiritual and devout. Certain faults come prominently out in the story which is impartially and unflinchingly told of him in Genesis. They were faults characteristic of his time and, as could be easily shown, were the faults of one who had wide knowledge of men and the habit of dealing with large affairs; the faults of a man of the world at that time, who in his virtues far transcended the times in which he lived. He was a Shemite by race: in his day the population of lower Mesopotamia was made up of two very different races. The original race is now called Sumerian: it belonged to the Turanian division of the human family, akin to the Chinese and the Turk.

They came from the north: their civilization is the earliest of which we have existing remains. They invented the cuneiform character, but the language for which that character is chiefly used is made up of diverse elements—Turanian and Semitic combined. Thousands of years before Abram, his Semitic ancestors had come into Mesopotamia in considerable numbers, apparently from Arabia. At first they were subject to the Sumerians. They adopted Sumerian civilization and developed it: in time they became more numerous and attained the civil supremacy. Two thousand years before Abram a Semitic dynasty was on the throne and ruled over all the westland to the coast of the Mediterranean. Eastward their caravans climbed the highlands of Persia; northward they followed the Euphrates to Armenia. At Haran, six hundred miles from Ur, the north and south highway was crossed by another great road running east to Persia and west to the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and Egypt. The crossing of these great highways made Haran an important town commercially: and a rich country lay about it in every direction.

In lower Mesopotamia was the Scriptural site of Eden. Uncertainly as yet, but presumptively, our modern historical sciences make the region about the Caspian Sea to have been the centre of dispersion for existing man: and that entirely agrees with the Scripture story of times following the flood. Quite certainly Chinaman, Sumerian, pyramid-building Egyptian, Shemite and apparently Aryan (our division of the human family) were once together in a region not far from the Caspian. From the northland the Chinese stock first of all wandered off toward their

present seats, on the way dismissing colonies, some of which entered India from the north east and became the so-called aborigines—now the hill tribes—of India. The people since called Sumerian, Egyptian, and Shemite went southward. In later time they mingled together in lower Mesopotamia. Through Siberia and Asia Minor the Aryan went into Europe: down the Indus he went into India and became the modern Hindoo. Of mingled Turanian and Semitic stock the pyramid-building Egyptian migrated from lower Mesopotamia, taking much of his civilization with him. But another people were in Egypt before him, apparently few in numbers, and of a different race. Of those aborigines we have learned for the first time within recent years, and as yet know little about them. In the time of Abram the ancient Egyptian empire was already gone; the Hyksos or shepherd kings were then on the throne. They came as conquerors, perhaps from Arabia; like Abram they were of Shemite stock and therefore received him and his descendants with favor. The Pelasgians and the Greeks of the Mycenaean period were in Europe and on the eastern islands of the Mediterranean. The Chinese were occupying their present territory, the Aryans were in the valley of the Indus, while, with exception of Asia Minor, western Asia from Persia to the Mediterranean constituted the empire which had its capital in Lower Mesopotamia.

Turning now to religious conditions, the great temple in Ur was dedicated to the moon-god whose name was Sin. It was in existence at least twelve hundred years before Abram, and we know not how much earlier. In three great stages it towered far

above the city, and on its summit the priests kept their astronomical and religious night-watches. In the worship there were animal sacrifices, and occasionally a human sacrifice. There were fasts and festivals, processions, music, hymns and prayers. The sense of sin was clearly expressed, but magical incantations were chiefly relied on as mode of deliverance from its curse. Many of the incantations and many hymns are preserved upon the tablets found in the temple library. Some hymns give clear indication of ideas and convictions far above much of the worship; as if the religion had once been purer, but had greatly degenerated. Thus, in one of the earliest hymns, God is addressed as "All-producing, life-unfolding, whose power benign extends over all the heaven and earth. In thy godhead, far and wide as sky and sea, thou spreadest thine awe." Those words naturally indicate monotheism; but from the earliest time of which we have record, polytheism had been prevalent. The type of it was peculiar. Each town had its chief divinity, which at first perhaps was sole divinity. Certainly in worship that divinity was often addressed as if supreme and alone. Some one of the heavenly bodies was taken as symbol and in some sort representative of deity, because impressively suggesting the divine. Sin was the moon-god, Bel the sun-god; yet by whatever name called or by whatever symbol represented, in the earliest times the underlying conceptions of deity were similar. It was as if, under different names, symbols and forms, the same being was nevertheless in mind: as we call God Father, Lord, the Almighty, the universe-King, and such like. More and more, however, especially

in different communities and under different influences, conceptions came to be different. The gods of different cities were thought of as different beings with different attributes. Political or commercial rivalries of the cities were transferred to the gods as rival deities. In case of war the conquering city made its god supreme, and all other gods subordinate; and thus the case went on from bad to worse. With moral degeneration of the people came degeneration in their thoughts of God. Righteousness was less prominent, superstitions and incantations increased, human passions and human vices were attributed to the gods; and the more as it came to be supposed that the impulse of passion and the tendency to vice were implanted by the gods.

But from our earliest knowledge of him Abram was a reverent monotheist. The fact is surprising and suggestive. Can it be that he was alone in his religious faith? One would naturally suppose that there must have been at least some other monotheists in Ur, and elsewhere in the empire. In Palestine, certainly, Melchisedek was monotheist, according to Scripture story—king and priest at once, as frequently in those days the subordinate kings were priests, while in somewhat later times the supreme king was considered to be personal representative of deity. Melchisedek is called priest of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: that is one of the strongest statements of monotheistic faith.

How came this contradiction of beliefs? What did it mean? What was the occasion and the purpose of calling Abram to leave his people and his native land, and become a wanderer for life?

To answer these questions we must go back and inquire respecting the origin and meaning of religion. Religion implies a spirit of loyalty and devotion to God: how first of all does man come to learn of God? Not from special and peculiar revelations: for such revelation purports to come from God, as from a being already known. As in the first verse of the Bible we read In the beginning God created. In some sort the reader is supposed already to know who God is; though in subsequent portions he finds the record of many special revelations, and many teachings respecting the character of God and of his relation to us. Students of the philosophy of religion are agreed that in primitive man, and in every young child of to-day, the capacity of recognizing God is given in the endowment of reason; and the revelations in which he is first of all recognized are the revelations in nature. There could be no teaching respecting God if there were not already some rudimental idea or sense of him. Looking out upon the world, primitive man and the child of yesterday saw the manifestation of mighty power, of manifold life; saw processes going on in what we call nature which had evident purpose and meaning in them, and recognized them as the manifestations of a being invisible but real. Of course the first sense of God is feeble and vague, but with experience it becomes increasingly clear. There is mystery in it which is increasingly the mystery of the unsearchable and the infinite on whom all things depend; the mystery of a being whose presence is manifested in his operations, and the recognition of whom is accompanied with sense of awe, with

thrill of adoration, with impulse to worship. All these are commonly slight and vague at first; the mind may easily be diverted from them; but they are also susceptible of great development. Given the spontaneous and natural recognition of God to begin with, then there may be teaching to any extent; there may be special revelation for special needs.

Primeval man was not mere animal; and there never was a being above the animal who had not yet become truly human. That theory is no longer tenable; the crudity of knowledge which gave rise to it, has been outgrown. Still less was primeval man ever in the condition of the degenerate and brutal savage of to-day. Some of the rude arts of the savage may be relics of primeval time, but the stupor of blight and the degeneracy of degradation were not primeval. However he came into being the first man was fully human in constitution to begin with, but he was mere child in condition. In its beginnings humanity has always been a germ. Every new life, and every new type of life, is first of all a germ developing after its kind. Child life develops rapidly as we know. It is sensitive to its surroundings, inquisitive, inventive, incessantly active. It soon comes to have quick and keen discernment.

The primitive form of religion was what is called animism. All nature seemed animated with life. It seems so to the childhood of to-day: to our maturest and most discerning thought it seems so no less: our latest science affirms an indwelling life. It was the Divine life perpetually revealed in manifestations endlessly varied. There is a



something unique and peculiar in all truly Divine manifestations: a something practically identical in them all, because of which they are recognized as Divine. That unique and identical somewhat is the fundamental element of natural monotheism. Because of it, and by means of it, the religious belief of early man might have matured into monotheism clearly held. But it is also true that in form and in superficial characteristics the Divine revelations in the world are very diverse. Objects which manifest the indwelling life in some impressive manner are very numerous, and very different one from another. The aspects and phases of nature are very different. There is one glory of the day and another glory of the night. The grand mountain reveals its maker; the mighty river reveals him in another mode. The tempest has its awfulness; the smiling, peaceful landscape, covered with verdant life, has its charm. If the element of difference be emphasized, if in any way that becomes controlling in thought, it makes possible an ultimate belief in many gods, in polytheism. It is also to be said that the dull or unspiritual mind may easily confound the outward object revealing the Divine with the spiritual life which is revealed; may confound the symbol with that which is symbolized, and in religious feeling practically identify the two. That would be a long stride towards idolatry; in the end would involve both idolatry and polytheism.

Now what was the outcome with early man? Scientific investigators of to-day give different answers. Doubtless they should not; but at present the answer is under discussion. On the one hand

it is claimed that the earliest religion was practically polytheistic. Revelations in nature are very diverse, it is said; and that diversity is very obtrusive. Then, far back as we may search in history, outside of the Scriptures, we find polytheism as the religion of the world. In the earliest period to which research has penetrated, in Nippur 6000 or 7000 B. C., polytheism held sway. On the other hand it is claimed that the sense of the Divine is always essentially the sense of one identical reality; while in all earliest hymns and religious utterances a monotheistic feeling is unmistakable; as in the Sumerian hymn from which I quoted. Demonstrably, Nature is monotheistic: all physical science proves that. The universe is one. There is one system of laws everywhere controlling forces which are the same. Demonstrably, human reason in its normal workings, its deepest constitution, its truest utterances, may be called monotheistic: psychology, philosophy and history prove that. In rational conception there can be but one infinite; there must be an ultimate cause and there can be but one. In all men reason is essentially one, and it is at one with the reason revealed in the universe. Truth is one, the right is one, the good is one in its principle. Why then should early man be polytheistic in religion — false to Nature in his most fundamental conceptions, false to reason in his most fateful conclusions? Only through spiritual degeneration; only by perversion. Certainly in the constitution of man there has come moral and religious degeneration. Far back as we may search, the condition in which we find him is abnormal, a condition of internal conflict and chaos; out of

harmony with himself in the relation and action of his powers; out of harmony with the world in his relation to its forces and processes. Come into existence however he may, he could not come from the hands of his Maker an abnormal being, perverted and degenerate as we find him. His condition has sometimes been said to be the result of evolution from the animal—the spiritual in him being overborne by animal forces not yet brought into subjection. Three answers are obvious. First, the evolution of man as man is an already accomplished fact. His development has but just begun, but the evolution of humanity is completed. Nevertheless, after twelve thousand, fifteen thousand, twenty thousand years of history, the domination of the animal over the spiritual is still the common fact. It is to be remembered, still further, that our ablest teachers in science no longer conceive of evolution as transition only by imperceptible modifications going on through incalculable time. Leaps are recognized. In the lower type imperceptible modifications go on for a period, but they are preparations for a transition as abrupt and complete as that from the chrysalis to the butterfly. According to one master in science the transition from the protean genus takes place wholly during the growth of a single embryo. Secondly, in no other case of evolution in all the geologic ages has the life evolved been, in all its representatives, abnormal after its kind. Such a fact in nature would be impossible we may well believe; such a theory is irrational. But, thirdly, the abnormal condition of man does not consist wholly or chiefly in a preponderance of animal

over spirit. In and by itself the spiritual life is in condition of functional conflict and chaos. It could easily dominate the animal if itself were normal. It is impossible. I think, fairly to escape the conclusion that something has gone wrong in human history, that perversion has come since history began; that, as Scripture allegory affirms, and as the Scriptures everywhere imply, there came a moral and religious perversion in the early stages of human development, affecting heredity and introducing serious derangement in human life.

Scripture story clearly shows how the perversion of polytheism came in. Like the child of to-day, the primitive human children needed care, and as their faculties developed needed some special teaching and training. They had no human ancestors to give it to them, and no animal ancestor could give it. Man was made for communion with his Maker. It is in accordance with common sense, in accordance with what we know of the Fatherhood of God, when we read that God did make special revelation to his human children, in mode corresponding to their capacity and in contents corresponding to their condition and need. That revelation would of course be revelation of the One who alone is God. Need of revelation would be greater after sin had come. It would involve limitation and training. But sinful temper revolted from Divine training, love's training though it was. Training was refused; the temper of self-will and recklessness was indulged. Essentially that was renunciation of God, practical atheism. Now it is very significant indeed that in all Scripture story of antediluvian times, the conflict

is between God-fearing and godlessness, between monotheistic piety and practical atheism. The flood came; that event we considered in detail some time ago.\* Some of our ablest geologists have held and still hold that the break-up of the ice age, with its destruction of palaeolithic man and contemporaneous animals, constituted the flood of which, so far as the Mesopotamian valley was concerned, we have account in Genesis. Partly because foretold by revelation, the flood produced peculiar and tremendous impression on those who survived it. The traditions of all races show how deep and permanent that impression was. It greatly developed the sense of God in Nature: the temper of atheism could not assert itself among the new population of the world.

Nevertheless sin continued, and sin involves spiritual degeneracy, weakening of spiritual discernment, perversion of spiritual process in spontaneous as well as in voluntary action. The characteristic form of sin now became a turning away from the God of history and of special revelation. What then? There are many and very diverse Divine manifestations in nature. Men may turn to what seem to be other and various deities who do not lay unwelcome requirement upon them. Discarding special revelation, and that which it involved, they may make their own interpretations of God, and may regard as symbols of deity the objects in nature which peculiarly awaken within them the sense of the Divine. If practical atheism is impossible, polytheism may come, and idolatry at the same time. In fact, however,

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\* In a previous sermon of the series.

that grows to be a worship and service of the creature more than the creator. Thus precisely, for substance, Paul explains the origin of polytheistic idolatry in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans. It is a rational explanation, entirely in accordance with what we know of the facts.

Properly interpreted, as we have seen in time past, the Babel story of Genesis gives account of the formal and imposing inauguration of polytheistic idolatry by the resolute co-operation of a very considerable number of the human family. Once established among men who were religiously degenerating, polytheistic idolatry would surely spread and be powerful. Something of the purer belief of an earlier time might long continue, even among the polytheists. A diminishing number might remain monotheists: if aggressive in their monotheism persecution might easily follow. It is to be remembered that people who degenerate in religion do not at once seriously degenerate in general civilization. The conception of God and of human relation to him is certainly of central and vital importance in history. It has to do with all highest ideals and with all endeavors to realize them. Essential misapprehension of God means corresponding misapprehension of the world which he made, and of the laws of life which he has ordained. The universe works out his purposes; to go wrong in respect to him is in the end to go wrong utterly. All this is apparent from the very nature of the case, and history proves it in every age. But for a season the leaven of corruption works in secret, all the more surely preparing calamity for the future. Meanwhile

within certain limits there may be development, many sided, apparently vigorous, outwardly magnificent. Just that did come in the old world, over and over. Changing from one race to another there came repeated developments, which were local and comparatively brief, and which successively ended in wreck. While the greater part of mankind either went into permanent stagnation or into a degradation in which little was left of humanity but the possibility of redemption.

In such a condition a considerable part of the world still remains. The processes which led to it were going on for many centuries. In the midst of them, when in the more favored regions calamitous results were beginning to appear, the call came to Abram. What did it mean? It meant a peculiar and blessed crisis in history brought on by the God of love, the Father of men. It meant the rescue of monotheism before it had wholly disappeared from the world. It meant maintenance in men of a sense of the Divine spirituality without which there can be no permanent development of spirituality in themselves. And maintenance of a sense of God's holiness without which there can be no adequate human aspiration towards perfectness. It meant the inauguration of the first processes of redemption while world-redemption was still possible—the taking of one true and great man, still loyal to the God of history, to be the founder of a new order of things: isolating him in the midst of a degenerating world, separating him from his relations to his kindred and to society, and from civil entanglements; subjecting him and his descen-

dants to a peculiar training that they might accomplish a peculiar mission. It meant the beginning of positive preparation for Christ and the great redemptive forces which he set into action. In outcome it meant a Christendom increasingly purified and ever enlarging, a redemptive missionary work carried on the world over. It meant revolutions in history, increasingly radical and extensive; in manifestation at once of an on-working redemption and of human progress, with ever fuller and intenser life, ever greater diversity of continually finer attainments and achievements. It meant the kingdom of Christ, developing to its earthly completeness that it may become kingdom of glory and ultimately of heaven.

In the historic order of events, except for that crisis inaugurated by the calling of Abram, we had not been here to-day.









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